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HELLENISTIC IDEAS OF SALVATION IN THE LIGHT OF ANCIENT ANTHROPOLOGY

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The consciousness of estrangement between man and God, and a longing to bridge this chasm, are fundamental to all religions of redemption. In the development of antiquity from the sixth century B.C. on, this type of thought, for which the way is already prepared in the older elements of popular faith, confronts us as a definite and vigorously increasing religious movement. Reformers, prophets, and puritans propagate a profounder piety, which is often mystic in character. The ecstatic Dionysus religion becomes the most important factor in this development. In this religion the common people, the poor and the needy, directly attain a more profound and personal relation to the deity. The believer loses his individual consciousness in enthusiasm and receives the divinity into himself. In moments of orgiastic ecstasy he experiences the ultimate goal of his existence, abiding fellowship with the god, who, as redeemer and savior will free him through death from the finiteness, the suffering, and the exigencies of the earthly life. Orphism sets forth this religious experience in a mystic theology which exerts a strong influence upon Pindar and Empedocles, for example, and which suggested to Plato his magnificent treatise on the destiny of the soul.

Though the first century of Hellenism's triumphant advance is dominated by rationalism, yet, from the decline of Hellenism until the disappearance of the ancient religion, tendencies toward mystic religion clearly recur and swell out into a strong stream. The advance of partially orgiastic oriental cults which, having been uprooted from the national soil, place believers in a purely personal relation to their god; the spread of astrology and its accompanying astral religion which, with its dominant fatalism, lay like a nightmare upon the soul; and the yearnings for redemption effected

through divine helpers who transcend the sphere of the astral gods—these are the first symptoms of the definite activity of oriental influences. The fact that Stoic theology looks beyond the horizon of the Greek religions and contains astrology among its other means of divination, gives an intimation of the strength of these foreign influences. Without this background we are not able to understand the Stoic Posidonius (born about 135 B.C.), who, so far as we know, was the first to advocate a purely philosophical doctrine of redemption which expresses the tendencies of the time in a renewal of orphic-platonic mysticism. According to Posidonius the soul has a heavenly origin. It is an offshoot from the fiery breath of God held captive in the prison-house of the body through birth into the earthly world, but destined for return to its higher home. Only he who in life preserves the divine part from defilement will ascend after death above the lower spheres and rise to the divine source. Our reverence for the starry heaven above us and for the wonders of the cosmos proves the human soul's relation to the heavenly world, and this mystical consciousness of likeness with the divine begets an other-worldly ideal of life.

In this representation the peculiar characteristic of all Hellenistic doctrines of redemption clearly emerges. Redemption is concerned not so much with guilt and sin as with corporeity and matter, finiteness and transitoriness. Guilt and sin themselves appear as physical defilement, since they are grounded in man's material nature. Therefore redemption is conceived of as essentially "physical" (*naturhaft*), and is determined by the dualism both of man's nature and of the two worlds. These conceptions and motives, first recognizable in Posidonius, dominate subsequent philosophical and religious development. In the time of Augustus the feeling of guilt, and longing for communion and renewal, emerge prominently.

From the second century A.D. on we possess rich source materials regarding the mystery cults and the profusion of new religious developments which grow out of the syncretism of the time. These sources acquaint us with the prevailing religious tendencies of antiquity in its declining period. Purification and rebirth, mystical union of the believer with the deity and the hope of bliss in the

future world, revelation and charismatic endowment which essentially constitute redemption—these are the motives dominating the rites, sacraments, faith, and teaching of this syncretism. As enjoined in the liturgy of the Phrygian mysteries:¹ *θαρρεῖτε μύσται τοῦ θεοῦ σεσωσμένου. ἔσται γὰρ ὑμῖν ἐκ πόνου σωτηρία*. The deity's resurrection from the dead gives to the initiates, who see their own destiny prefigured in his adventures, hope of a life after death. Apuleius' romance tells how the most intimate relation of Lucius to Isis was established by various stages of initiation. From the day of his deliverance, when the goddess first appeared to him, he is under her special protection and is under obligation to dedicate his entire life to her. Her might raises him above the power of fate which no longer can harm him. She promises the reborn individual an eternal and blessed life.

This representation is in accord with the disposition to resist the fatalism of star-worship so widespread in the religion of this period. The individual seeks fellowship with a mighty god who is able to raise his protégés above the hopeless round of necessity and above the regions controlled by the powerful astral spirits. A magical papyrus contains the following prayer to Serapis:² "Preserve me from the might of the stars, hold me back from the cruel compulsion of fate, allot me a happy destiny, bless my life, O Lord, with all goodness; for I am thy slave and protégé." In the "Mithraliturgy"³ the initiate implores his god to grant him power sufficient to enable him to mount to heaven. He wishes to be freed from the bitter and inexorable compulsion of fate, to leave behind him the mortal nature of man, and to be reborn to a life of immortality. Arnobius⁴ makes sport of the heathen who boast that as God's children they are superior to the laws of fate and that they are sure of returning to their home in the kingdom of God. In the following prayer of thanks contained in a document of Hermetic teaching, redemption is spiritualized:⁵ "We thank thee,

¹ Firmicus Maternus, *De errore prof. relig.*, 22, 1; cf. Julian, *Oration*, V, 169C.

² Dieterich, *Abraxas*, p. 178.

³ Dieterich, *Mithrasliturgie*, Leipzig, 1910²

⁴ II, 62; cf. II, 13.

⁵ Apuleius *Asclepius*, chap. 41; cf. the Greek parallel text discussed by Reitzenstein in *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, VII, 393 ff. Previously Apuleius describes the kingdoms of *εὐμαρμένη*, *ἀνάγκη* and *κόσμος*.

Most High, that we through thy grace have attained to such a light of knowledge [γνώσις] Delivered through thy power, we rejoice that thou hast fully shown us thyself, we rejoice that thou hast conferred upon us in our earthly life initiation into eternity [Greek: "hast deified by thy look"]. . . . Only one request do we make of thee, will'st thou keep us in thy knowledge and not permit us to lose the new life." In a prayer of the above-mentioned magical papyrus, inner mysticism is linked with coarse polytheistic ideas:² "Come to me from the four winds, thou All-ruling One: Come into my entire life, into my mind and my heart, and fulfil all the wishes of my soul. For thou art I and I am thou; whatever I say shall come to pass, for I hear thy name as a protecting charm in my heart. No threatening hand shall obtain power over me. No spirit, no demon, no ghost, nor any other evil apparition from the underworld shall oppose me, because of thy name which I bear in my heart."

The idea of redemption is seen to pervade both the lower and the higher stages of religious belief, extending even to the region of sublime philosophical spiritualization. On the one hand men crave freedom from the power or tyranny of evil spirits who beset them on all sides with manifold dangers. On the other hand they groan under the weight of astral religion, which makes them the sport and plunder of the star-gods; a mighty deity who is able to control fate is needed to deliver man from bondage to the *archons* and from the rule of *εἰμαρμένη* and *ἀνάγκη*. Or, in the third place, the soul, conscious of its divine origin, strives for redemption from its foreign and unrelated companion, the body. It seeks deliverance from things sinful, material, and mortal. But the fundamental motive in these various representations is the same; it is longing for elevation above the earthly world and its ruling powers, i.e., for deification. The end of redemption is a life of eternal blessedness. The redeemer is the deity to whose service one devotes his whole life in order to obtain his help and favor. The means of affecting unity with the deity are of various sorts, some being crude and others more refined. These are rites of initiation, purifications, sacred acts where the redemption of believers is symbolically depicted in myths of the

² Dieterich, *Abrahas*, p. 195; Reitzenstein, *Poimandres*, p. 15.

gods, partaking of holy food which is itself divine in nature, and the artificial incitement of ecstasy and self-hypnotism. Even crude practices of sexual union and divine compulsion are not lacking, for the ancient ideas and rites of primitive faiths come to new life in this fusion of religions.

Christian and Hellenistic ideas of redemption cannot be sharply separated, but stages of development in Christianity must be carefully distinguished. Gnosticism is naturally most closely related to Hellenistic mysticism and is indeed sprung from the same soil as religious syncretism. Thus in Gnosticism one finds metaphysical dualism and the "physical" [*naturhaft*] conception of redemption, the same end and the same means of redemption, and the same ideas about the heavenly ascent of the soul. A few examples may serve to illustrate this relationship. The Naassene hymn pictures the need and suffering of the soul in suspense between spirit and matter, and the descent of the redeemer who reveals to the soul the mysteries of knowledge. The Peratae boast that they alone have apprehended the compulsion of fate and know how to raise themselves above transitoriness.¹ A Gnostic, from a feeling of gratitude for deliverance from the powers of fate, acknowledges² that "the constellations are of different species and are beneficent, harmful, just, and sinister powers. The Lord saves us from this conflict and war of the powers and gives us peace in this battle of angelic forces, some fighting for us and others against us." The Gnostics also know definite conjurations by which the soul in its ascent compels, through appeal to a mighty deity, the powers of the stars to grant it passage.³ The gnostic doctrine of redemption rests upon anthropological dualism. The real "fall" of man occurred when the soul was clothed with a body, and deliverance from the body is salvation. The opposition of spirit and body already divides the human race into two classes.

What, now, is the situation in early Christianity? Are the influences of Greek mysticism already traceable there? Probably they can be discovered only by inference. This has been done

¹ Hippolytus, V, 16.

² Clement, *Excerpta Theodoti*, 71 f.

³ Wendland, *Die hellenistisch-römische Kultur*, 2. Aufl., p. 174; Irenaeus, I, 21, 5.

by Reitzenstein in a manner convincing to me in the conclusions he has drawn from the agreement, for example, of the Hermetic literature and Apuleius with the New Testament writings. He who is not satisfied with these inferences and who does not allow the mysticism of the oriental religions to date earlier than the second century A.D., where the earliest literary sources begin, will hardly be convinced of Hellenistic influence upon primitive Christianity. The fact that guilt and sin are central in Christian redemption, in contrast with Hellenistic ideas, is often emphasized as a fundamental distinction between Hellenism and Christianity. But notions and expressions akin to Hellenistic mysticism are already present in, the Pauline doctrine of redemption. Sin is traced back to the flesh and to the natural man. According to Rom. 8:19-22 perishable, degenerate creation looks for deliverance from transitoriness and for the revelation of the sons of God. As the apostle fervently longed for freedom from the body of death (Rom. 7:24), so also redemption is for him deliverance from *αἰὼν ἐνεστώς* (Gal. 1:4). This leaning toward a "physical" and cosmic extension of redemption is an approach to Hellenistic conceptions. Paul's representation of the believer as living and suffering in Christ, as crucified, buried, and raised with him, recalls the similar way in which the Hellenistic mystery-religions relate the believer to the dead and risen god (Attis, Osiris, Adonis). Thus Paul actually appears to be indebted to Hellenistic mysticism for certain suggestions. As Plato used Orphism, so Paul appropriated forms of expression for his faith from the mysticism of the world to which he preached the gospel.

The relationship of Christianity to Hellenism appears closer in the Ephesian letter. Here Christ is the supreme power of the entire spirit-world, exalting believers above the bondage of the inferior spirits into his upper kingdom (1:18-22). Christians must struggle with these spirits, among whom the *κοσμοκράτορες* (astral spirits) are named. In like manner from the second century on Christ is more frequently extolled as a deliverer from the power of fate.¹ When Ignatius regards Christ's work as the communication

¹ Wendland, *op. cit.*, pp. 177, note 1, and 400. Examples could be greatly increased.

of *γνῶσις* and *ἀφθαρσία*, and the Eucharist as food of immortality, he, like the author of the Fourth Gospel, shows the influence of Greek mysticism. Irenaeus' realistic doctrine of redemption also has, in common with Greek mysticism, the fundamental notions of deification, abolition of death, imperishability, and *gnosis*.

This development reaches its climax with the great Alexandrian theologians. In the platonizing metaphysics of Origen, redemption is a wide cosmic process embracing the whole spirit-world which has sunk down into material existence. It is led back, freed from sensuous matter, to unity with its divine source. In this universal mode of thinking the ethical content of the early Christian doctrine of salvation almost wholly disappeared. Hellenistic anthropology and metaphysics, which at first affected Christianity only on the periphery, have now attained a dominant and central position. This type of theology became fundamental in the Eastern church, where it has been essentially conserved even to the present. The Western church, however, especially through the strong influence of Augustine, placed more emphasis upon the ethical content of redemption from guilt and sin, and drew from this the consequences for the care of the individual soul. Viewed from the standpoint of fundamental and dominant tendencies, redemption in the thought of the Greek church is seen to be more metaphysical, other-worldly, and "physical"; while in the West it is essentially individual, ethical, indeed an affair of this life. In the former case it is more a redemption from things finite, earthly and harmful, while with the latter it is deliverance from things sinful and wicked.¹ The "physical" and creaturely features of Hellenistic mysticism, which first touched early Christian soteriology lightly, and later attained a dominating position in the Alexandrian theology, predominates in the Eastern thought of redemption. In the West, on the other hand, there is a renewal of primitive Christian thinking, which overshadows Hellenistic features and relegates them to a secondary place.

¹ These views have recently been worked out in greater detail by A. Harnack, "Der Geist der morgenländischen Kirche im Unterschied von der Abendländischen," *Sitzungsberichte der Preuss. Akademie der Wiss.*, 1913, pp. 157-83.